Simone Weil | “Martian”

...rifle on her shoulder. A curious Mona Lisa smile. We should all learn to carry a gun. It’s vastly harder than you think. Just in case: the urge to suicide may loom and vanish in an instant. Having the gun handy and not use it: the discipline this incurs. So rare and so necessary.

– Bianco Luno

...what is the use of studying philosophy if all it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse problems of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life. ...You see, I know that it is difficult to think well about ‘certainty’, ‘probability’, ‘perception’ etc. But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or try to think, really honestly about your life & other peoples lives. And the trouble is that thinking about these things is not thrilling, but often downright nasty. And when it’s nasty then it’s most important.[1]

– Wittgenstein

What would be the use of discovering so-called objective truth, of working through all the systems of philosophy and of being able, if required, to review them all and show up the inconsistencies within each system... what good would it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognised her or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear rather than a trusting devotion?[2]

– Kierkegaard

The Pope is just *the Pope. I, on the other hand, am Catholic.*[3]

– Weil

She’s insane!

– Charles de Gaulle

I know this girl; I raised her; I lamented her death; but I [am grateful] that she left this great book [The Need for Roots]... *It was written for everyone; it is simply good French in the manner of Montesquieu;... it is the good French of a woman who did not hesitate to try factory work and who was able to judge all this.... machinery. This tempestuous girl... remained*

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1. Norman Malcolm quotes this from a letter from Wittgenstein to him. *Ludwig Wittgenstein — A Memoir*, 2nd ed, with a biographical sketch by G. H. von Wright and Wittgenstein’s letters to Malcolm (Oxford, 1984), pp. 93-4.
2. *Journal*, Gilleleie, August 1, 1835.
3. Paraphrase of Weil’s stance toward Catholicism. “Never having been baptized, Weil was not formally a member of the Church. But her extreme sensitivity to the Church’s deficiencies, which kept her from asking for baptism, seems to indicate that at heart she was a true child of the Church.” From “The Spirit Blows Where It Chooses: Simone Weil, the Church and Vatican II,” Jane Khin Zaw, *The Way*. April 2017. Weil’s understanding of what it meant to be “catholic” (small “c” = *universal*) was inconsistent with dogma, however. See the section on her understanding of religion below.

enigmatic for me. She was so above her peers that any comparison was impossible. I had nicknamed her 'the Martian,' wanting to express [therein] that she had nothing of us and that she judges us all sovereignly.

– Alain[4]

She declared in no uncertain tones that only one thing mattered in the world: the revolution which would feed all the starving people of the earth. I retorted, no less peremptorily, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to find the reason for their existence. She looked me up and down: 'It's easy to see you've never been hungry,' she snapped.

– Simone de Beauvoir[5]

Go figure

Warrior/angel, arch-Christian/anti-Christian, mystic/realist, Bolshevik/anti-Marxist, metaphysical anorexic, post-modern Platonist... Too blind use it, you carry a gun. It signals both your helplessness before the universe *and* your singularity. About contradiction. You are *open* and absorb *all of it*. The only way out is transcendence – and that is *impossible*. Good luck with that! "...a heart that could beat right across the world," wrote Simone de Beauvoir (not exactly a fan) of Weil. By worldly standards, an utter failure, dead at 34 – her one success, she got over the illness of having been born.

It's ok to entertain the logical possibility that God may shed grace on you. Just don't bet on it. Or think you are entitled to take consolation from the generosity of logic. On second thought, maybe you should just forget it. If you can. It is a requirement of being a Christian that you master atheism *first*. She virtually said that. Attend to what is before you. God isn't there. But *you* are. God exists in order to be absent. Whence the expectation that it was to be any other way?

On religion

As close to being an atheist... without being one.

– Bianco Luno

...to perceive without reverie

– Siân Miles[6]

The word "catholic" means "universal." Weil saw in *what is common* to all religions as what is true and real.[7] With this universality she identified. It was why she was drawn to Catholicism – at least, to its pretensions if not how it typically manifests itself. To the extent *ritual* grounds – roots – people in a

4. Alain (aka, Emile Chartier) was Weil's philosophy professor. De Beauvoir and Sartre's, too. On Alain's calling Weil "the Martian."
5. De Beauvoir wrote of a conversation with Weil in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Trans. James Kirkup. New York: Harper Collins, 1974.
6. From her *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (2005), xiii. Not just the collection but Siân Miles' introduction is highly recommended for its penetrating grasp of Weil as well as the rich collection of sources.
7. At 16, having mastered Greek and Latin, Weil taught herself Sanskrit to read the Bhagavad Gita in the original. She also studied Buddhism and Taoism. Her family were secular, deracinated Jews. She alighted on a notion of "catholicity" derived from Catholicism having surveyed the field. Celebrated variously as a Catholic mystic, an unabashed heretic, a secular saint, a spiritual provocateur *a la* Kierkegaard and Pascal. And, of course, *practically*-speaking, insane and suicidal.

shared consciousness of suffering and injustice and a felt imperative to relieve it, she was moved by ritual. *Dogma, no.* This is what made her a philosopher and not a theologian. Whether there was an afterlife, whether Jesus rose from the dead, was the son of God or whether the dogma of any other religion was true or not was not interesting to her. In fact, obsession with such *cognitive entertainment* could easily stand in the way of *practicing* religion by distracting attention and wasting human resources. Even atheists fall into this trap by taking the bait to argue with believers. Moreover, formal religions (including atheism), like political belief systems, conduce to collective illusions at the expense of the individual development necessary to attain the universal realization we just alluded to. These are more often than not distractions – culpable ones, to the degree human resources are finite, and the task demanded of them is not.

For the aspiring Christian, the challenge was to master atheism *first*. Without doing so, you don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of approaching what is valid about being a Christian.[8] To master atheism means to see that God is as good as dead, to echo Nietzsche, for all the difference it should make to you. A question in the air at the time around World War II among serious thinkers on the human condition was *where was God during the Holocaust?* Weil's answer was where were *you?* She implied you – and everyone else – *is* God.[9] Where were *they* – that is to say, *you?*

Hitler by himself was not responsible for the Holocaust... It was the receptivity of a previously dehumanized population – thus prepared and ready to accept authority – if we care to look for a cause.[10] It is against the ubiquitous forces that dehumanize wherever the individual is erased in favor of a collective born of fear-driven power aggrandizement that Weil pitted herself. To want to singularize blame (or praise) in one person – *the other* – is a gross act of irresponsibility. It is to willfully blind oneself to the fact that human communities generate the humans comprising them.[11] Reality is a cooperative enterprise. *Nevertheless, the* acceptance *of whatever reality is foisted on you is a very lonely one.* It is in your power to *resist* it. Win, likely not – but what's winning got to do with it?

But hers is not the material individualism that we commonly associate with liberal democratic ideals and their indulgence for economic power concentration (e.g., neo-liberalist capitalism), where the freedom celebrated is about doing good by being left to your own devices.[12] The only freedom that matters is that to erode the self, and only *you* may do this. Others, unless they also are in the process of dissolving *their center* of concern, may only rob you of the privilege of doing in your own. This is, she argued, dehumanization. To be reduced to a cog in machine. It is to have your soul raped.

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8. Doing so, you *do* have a chance in hell. For the atheist, the challenge is elsewhere.
9. Who needs a priest, a Pope, a church? These can only be temptations to defer responsibility. Unlike the atheist, she accepted we may need crutches, but the *need* is born of a self that needs undoing – *decreation*. The atheist, to the degree he or she *doesn't* believe, *believes.* Asked about God (if God didn't encompass the person asking), she would have to demur, lacking "the necessary data," a question she was obliged to leave "alone." If you have to ask, you won't fathom the answer.
10. In late 2024, we could as easily insert here "Trump" and all that is ominous and attributed to him by "non-deplorables."
11. If dictatorship is really in the cards for the U.S., don't blame it all on Trump. The country is ripe for it. It's been an *oligarchy* for a long time, and Plato, for one, thought that, along with *democracies*, both get around to tyranny sooner or later.
12. Isaiah Berlin in "Two Concepts Liberty" called this negative freedom or liberty: a "freedom *from*" in opposition to the positive "freedom *to*": the *prepositional* freedoms, for example: freedom *from* government interference vs. freedom *to* engage in government. Berlin's clarity is to be commended even if he failed to appreciate the uneasy *equal* relevance of *each*.

What another may (kindly) do for you is *attend* to who you are. Attend without preconception, judgment – with utter self-abnegating openness. "Attention," the technical term for her:

> Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it. All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas… all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active; we have wanted to carry out a search. (Weil, 1951 b)

The Pope is *just* the Pope. You don't need a priest, Pope, cathedral, or an institution or a community of believers, a scripture or dogma – or, least of all, a philosophical argument. God is not to be found this way because God is not an entity requiring your belief or acknowledgment. You are *not* entitled to believe in God just because it suits you. If there is any meaning to the notion of "God," perhaps it may be something you may participate in *becoming* a part of. But it can't be your agenda to fret over this. The best – and *most* – you may do is *attend* to the suffering around you and *do* something about it. *This*, Weil saw, is the deepest message of all religions. It is the universal; i.e., the "catholic" part. The Roman Catholic Church – and most of its Protestant spawn – fall short of this ideal because they promote "belief" as though this is what is needed or could even help. She came from deracinated Jews – Judaism was not spared.[13]

On political philosophy

If one thinks of the objective conditions, the transition *from our present system to a decentralized system is very difficult – impossible, because it would require a conscious collaboration between power and the oppressed. The powers will take no steps towards diminishing themselves: even if they wished to, they could not, because of their rivalries. And...*

The machine will go on functioning by its own laws until it wrecks itself.

Refuse to be an accomplice. Don't lie – don't keep your eyes shut…[14]

– Weil

To the extent religion becomes a *power concentration – i.e.,* takes up trucking in material power over individual humans – it is a *political* enterprise, not a spiritual one.[15] About which, she went on to say: It doesn't matter which ideology drives a power concentration. It only matters that it is a *power*

13. She exposed herself to be counted among the worst of anti-Semites – according to Elie Wiesel's criteria for a *zar*, a "*self*-hating Jew," in company with other deracinated Jews or half-Jews Karl Kraus, Otto Weininger, Henri Bergson, Gertrude Stein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *et al.* See the chapter "Stranger in the Bible," p. 67 in Elie Wiesel's *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, 1995.
14. *First and Last Notebooks*, Richard Rees (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 6.
15. The same bothered Kierkegaard about Protestant Christendom.

concentration bent on subjugating individual consciousness. Whether it is a bureaucratic (that is, leftist) or a corporate (that is, rightist) autocratic or oligarchic dictatorship, concentration of power devolves (however facilely understandable its initial motives) to a focus on consolidating material power through manipulation and dehumanization.[16] Weil saw this happening in both the Germany and Soviet Union of the 1930s.[17] She herself witnessed it firsthand fighting against fascists in Spain, and found confirmation in the work of the French novelist and essayist George Bernanos, a deeply committed Catholic royalist, initially supporting the *other* side of the same conflict. Bernanos wanted to believe, at first, that there were real Christians among those who early on threw in their lot with Franco. But he underwent the bitter realization that this was far from true. In a remarkable letter to Bernanos (once arch-conservative royalist), Weil (former Bolshevik) wrote of a convergence in their views. Coming, as they were, from *opposite* ends of the political spectrum they found spiritual kinship:

> One sets out as a volunteer, with the idea of sacrifice, and finds oneself in a war which resembles a war of mercenaries, only with much more cruelty and with less human respect for the enemy.
>
> I could say much more on the same lines, but I must limit myself. Having been in Spain, I now continually listen to and read all sorts of observations about Spain, but I could not point to a single person, except you alone, who has been exposed to the atmosphere of the civil war and has resisted it. What do I care that you are a royalist, a disciple of Drumont? You are incomparably nearer to me than my comrades of the Aragon militias—and yet I loved them.
>
> What you say about nationalism, war, and French foreign policy after the war is equally sympathetic to me. I was ten years old at the time of Versailles, and up to then I had been patriotically thrilled as children are in war-time. But the will to humiliate the defeated enemy which revealed itself so loathsomely everywhere at that time (and in the following years) was enough to cure me once for all of that naive sort of patriotism, *I suffer more from the humiliations inflicted by my country than from those inflicted on her.*[18] [Emphasis added.]

On ending the evil of war: drop nurses, not bombs

Never react to an evil in such a way as to augment it.[19]

– Weil

How is that force to be countered? In 1939 and thereafter, the answer was to respond by force... and in time by atomic force. Killing, after all, is the answer to killing. That is a given, a brutish Hobbesian truth – the law of necessity.

– Ronald K. L. Collins

16. No less in the factory work she exposed herself to.
17. I think it is well along in the U.S. as I write.
18. *Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion*, Maria Clara Bingemer, Lutterworth Press, 2015, p. 166.
19. *First and Last Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 6.

Before it occurred to U.S. leaders to firebomb Dresden and Tokyo, or drop nukes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Weil had already suggested something equally imaginative to Charles de Gaulle, the French leader in exile in London. She suggested parachuting volunteer nurses behind Nazi lines to assist with the wounded and *hold the hands of the dying.*[20] She thought such a quixotic performance the only hope of minifying war... at least worth a try. Masculine bomb-dropping, lesson-teaching, had clearly not worked. It only reinforces the historically validated inference that *the purpose of peace is to prepare for the next war.*[21] Her variant of the Lysistrata strategy, perhaps, wouldn't work, but, unlike Aristophanes, she wasn't kidding. She would gladly be first to volunteer if they let her. They didn't.

De Gaulle and his advisors dismissed her suggestion as madness. The young women would be killed. Likely raped, then killed, they were thinking. Weil's response, had her proposal been given the time of day, would have gone something this:

> ...and what is happening to the young *men* sent to the front lines? They are killed, maybe tortured, then killed. How *different* is that? Do you think their performance *prevents* war? Where's the evidence for that? Isn't this the *second* World War[22] in less than the space of three decades?[23]

Weil was not an "equality" feminist like the other famous Simone, her early schoolmate. Weil would likely align herself, if alignment on these matters had anything to do with anything, with what others would later call "difference" or "parity" feminism of, for instance, Sylviane Agacinski. The masculine and the feminine are not *mere* "social constructions." As far as the real world is concerned, they are contending *natural kinds*.[24] De Beauvoir's line that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman"[25] is a little rich. It buys into the rhetorical abstraction, largely *created by men,* that "all men are created equal." Originally, they meant *men* – the kind with external genitalia, not a concocted political abstraction. They are *not* born equal if by that you mean *interchangeable*. In some possible world, maybe, but not this one. Sympathizers, like J. S. Mill, had offered to extend, condescendingly, male privilege to women, that is, share with women what *men* find valuable – *the specifically masculine* notion of freedom and privilege – as though it is obvious that women would have the *same* understanding of these notions as men. *Without* asking, moreover. Such generosity on Mill's part reeked of paternalism, something Mill himself famously deprecated. What is the first thought that comes to mind when men talk of "freedom"? *Leave me alone,* i.e., *freedom from interference.* Agacinski, for one, dared to suggest that the (Berlinian) concept of freedom that mattered

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20. Expertise in nursing was not a strict requirement. After all, how much training do you need *to hold the hand* of the dying?... Crazy as the idea may have struck de Gaulle, something like Weil's plan was, in fact, attempted by a small band of American nurses, even making it into a (pathetic) propaganda film, *Parachute Nurses*. There is no indication the instigators of this largely forgotten episode ever heard of Weil.
21. "War is exhausting, like good sex. The longer the refractory period, the better it will be next time." – Luno
22. She grew up in the middle of World War I and died in the middle of World War II.
23. At least, the privilege of quixoticism could be extended to Dulcineas. Their orgasmic experience of war, traditionally, men have not wished to share with women. See William Broyles' essay "Why Men Love War."
24. Bianco Luno alludes to the critical usefulness of binocular vision: "*Two* eyes are better than one. They see mostly the same thing, but *not* quite. One eye will not do as well. What one sees is never the same as the other." Thus he expresses the significance of "difference" feminism.
25. *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier trans. Vol II, Pt. 1, Ch. 1. (2009).

more to women was the *other*: *freedom to engage* – not to be left alone.[26] For Weil, what is – or ought to be – common to all is an imperative to mobilize the full set of *native* resources, material and conceptual, whatever these might be, to alleviate suffering and attend to the humanity of the other.

Weil, half-blind, frail and sickly, took as an implication of her view that if she died helping alleviate suffering, how could this be any *less* morally or politically consequential or significant than what typically happens to a young man with a gun in war?

In her notebooks – cherry-picked and posthumously distorted by one of her less-than-comprehending admirers, Gustave Thibon, into the collection well-known today as *Gravity and Grace* – something essential of Weil, nevertheless, comes through: she confesses she does not know exactly what she would do confronted face-to-face with an enemy who would kill her if she did not kill them first. (Something she was spared by the, no doubt, well-meaning – family, friends and the French government in exile – from experiencing.) She willingly goes into battle with a gun, presumably prepared to use it. Perhaps, she would let the other kill her – her gun having served usefully as catalyst for an epiphanic occasion. Maybe, *just maybe*, the gun would provoke in her killer an awakening… After all, the old wartime saw "kill or be killed" only guarantees more of the same. In this way, one may instantiate pacifism with a gun. You may die for a cause you deeply believe in *without* being the agent of anyone else's death... Worth a try?[27]

Maybe humans *are* irremediably depraved and constitutionally incapable of shame at their capacity for atrocity. If so, there remain only the temptations of nihilism (give up) or mysticism (hope against all *rational* hope). Take your pick. *Her realism motivated her mysticism.* The nihilist may be right but it is *as* possible to pretend the nihilist is wrong, since the pretense or motions of hoping *ought* to be unobjectionable to a *true* nihilist – one who is not in a position to complain, given their chary norms, if we make up stories to keep us motivated. Give the nihilist their due: their rightness irrelevant. Make up stories and hope – but *lucidly*.[28]

The difference between Weil and others who harbor hopes for positive human development is that she does not make up lies to shore up hope. Hope, for her, if anything, is *primal*. It does not need justification, and wouldn't find it if did. It does not fall out of an argument or myth.

It is what we *do* if we have not yet become *former* humans.

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26. By "men" and "women," we mean what Otto Weininger called feminine and masculine *principles*, ways of conceptualizing clear patterns apparent in human nature. Nothing about this implies that these principles inhere in *pure* form in any given individual female or male, as Weininger himself emphasized. Quite the opposite. They are Platonic types. They are *manifest* and *organize* human experience, nevertheless. They *model* what we have to work with as humans. They do not, *in themselves*, describe boundaries *nor* prescribe hierarchies. It is a tragic realization, perhaps, a source of dissonance and error in the context of insecurity and power relations, certainly, but this phenomenological dioeciousness is not eliminable without eviscerating "humanity" to the extent we remain loyal to that *far more* abstract notion. See Luno's expansion on Weininger: "An Assay at introduction." We are *not* sexless.

27. Consider the instrumentalization of Japanese civilians in order to preempt with "shock and awe" any designs the Soviets might have entertained to mess with U.S. (then and since nuclear) world supremacy. To the Soviets: "See, we are willing and able to vaporize entire human communities... so don't try anything foolish." How well has "shooting across the bow" at whatever target conveniently presented itself worked? (*Cf.*, again, the U.S. response to 9/11: "*Somebody* over there needs to be killed.")

28. Camus' affinity for Weil becomes clear.

"The Martian": interpreting characters[29] like her

I identify these takes on Weil:

1. A saint for Catholic intellectuals

Recruit her as an inspiration to belief in an increasingly secular world.[30]

2. A case of pathology

- "on the spectrum"
- anorexic
- unhealthily obsessive
- insane[31]

3. "The Martian"

She was on "another level," unattainable by me and the persons I know, from which I am permitted to conclude either she was:

- an *anomaly*: by setting her aside as extraordinary, we "humbly" excuse ourselves from comparison – remarked, but shelved as a curiosity. That there are so many like us and so few like her eases this reaction.
- Or, a *lesson*: we *don't* excuse ourselves. It is not that she was so superior. It is that *we* are sorry excuses for what we like to call "human."

Weil *never* thought of herself as saint-like, far from it. By painting her such, we discourage comparison. By pathologizing her, we do the same. To pathologize is to set aside. Finally, we *may* describe her as "exceptional" if we are not faintly praising. In which case, we are setting aside.

We don't wish to have our rest disturbed.

Resources

1. *Philosophize This!* host Stephen West presents a podcast series on Simone Weil in four parts 1, 2, 3 and 4.

2. *Partially Examined Life* has an extensive series Weil's political philosophy (podcast).

29. Otto Weininger and Ludwig Wittgenstein are two others who provoked similar reactions.
30. There was Gustave Thibon's slanted editing of Weil's *Gravity and Grace*. This continues, for instance, in hagiographic talks like this "Simone Weil: An Astonishing Life (P1) - by Brad Jersak."
31. From de Gaulle onwards, many commentators, even those somewhat appreciative of her, express an obligation to pathologize her. Some are less abashed about it than others, for example, "Simone Weil and the Phenomenon of Failure" by Heather King.

3. “The Philosophy of Simone Weil with Kenny Novis and David Levy” (video) – “In this episode of Acid Horizon, Will takes the lead as host, welcoming Kenny Novis and special guest David Levy. David, a philosophy professor at the University of Edinburgh and one of the translators and editors of *Simone Weil: Basic Writings*, joins the conversation. Simone Weil, the renowned French mystic and political activist, has influenced a broad range of thinkers. Today, we explore Weil’s key concepts, such as decreation, her moral philosophy, and her critique of colonialism.”

4. “The Thought and Life of Simone Weil with Kenny Novis,” (video) Lepht Hand. “In this LEPHT HAND interview, Sereptie speaks with philosopher and researcher Kenny Novis about the complex and often contentious ideas of Simone Weil. The conversation explores the controversies surrounding Weil's life and work, while Kenny offers valuable insights into her thought, exploring her deep personal engagement with Christianity and her association with liberation movements across Europe during the interwar and WWII eras.”

5. SEP entry on Weil.

6. Weil’s personal impact: *“An Encounter with Simone Weil* [documentary] tells the story of French philosopher, activist, and mystic, Simone Weil – a woman Albert Camus described as ‘the only great spirit of our time.’ On her quest to understand Simone Weil, filmmaker Julia Haslett confronts profound questions of moral responsibility both within her own family and the larger world. From the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War to anti-war protests in Washington DC, from intimate exchanges between the filmmaker and her older brother, who struggles with mental illness, to captivating interviews with people who knew Simone Weil, the film takes us on an unforgettable journey into the heart of what it means to be a compassionate human being.”

7. “The Subversive Simone Weil” – Robert Zaretsky in conversation with Lottie Moore (video) – her most recent biographer’s intro to Weil’s life and thought.

8. Summmary of what she wrote to a priest expressing her views on religion. My notes on Gaita’s intro to Weil’s “Letter to a Priest.”

9. Abi Doukhan’s (video) lectures and discussions on Weil’s *Waiting for God* – Intro, Part 1, and Part 2 – explain how Weil’s understanding of religion is different from the Christian or Catholic one... Where was God during the Holocaust? Weil’s answer: “*Where were you?*” Why does Weil imply that one cannot even begin to be a Christian without mastering atheism first? Why would the Pope as “Pope” (the “full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the universal church in matters of faith and morals”) be useless to her vision of what is and isn’t valuable about Catholicism?

10. Contemporary echoes of Weil: “Mattias Desmet on Mass Formation Psychosis,” interview at *Unherd.* Desmet pathologizes what Weil would simply say is the “human condition.”

11. Simona Giurgea performs (video) Simone Weil’s essay “*The Iliad* or the Poem of Force” (text). From the opening lines:

> To define force — it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him.

Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the Iliad never wearies of showing us:

> ... the horses
> Rattled the empty chariots through the files of battle,
> Longing for their noble drivers. But they on the ground Lay,
> dearer to the vultures than to their wives.

The hero becomes a thing dragged behind a chariot in the dust:

> All around, his black hair
> Was spread; in the dust his whole head lay,
> That once-charming head; now Zeus had let his enemies
> Defile it on his native soil.

The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero's head no washedout halo of patriotism descends.

12. A collection of Weil's writing as downloadable pdfs is here.

Notes

Influence
Among those influenced by Weil are: Albert Camus, T. S. Eliot, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Pope John XXIII, Czesław Miłosz, Iris Murdoch, Flannery O'Connor, Ingeborg Bachmann, Susan Sontag, and Anne Carson. There is no evidence that Ludwig Wittgenstein and Weil knew – or even *of* – each other, though, for awhile, they were in London at the same time. But the striking resonance between their views on ethics, aesthetics, religion, and uncompromising personal and political engagement has been noticed.

Mathematics, Platonism and Weil
Simone Weil and her mathematician brother André. What's mathematics got to do with combating dehumanization?

As children, Weil and her math genius brother, performed Plato's dialogues in the original Greek. Simone was better versed in math and physics than most philosophers, it should be noted. She and her brother were close but also fierce competitors. He once said of her that on quantum physics she may have "one or two" things wrong.

Weil alternate intro

I have been wanting to do Simone Weil for a long time, but have struggled on how to approach her as a topic.

Not as well known as she should be – she's been called one of the most underrated thinkers of the last century, but she is beginning to get some long overdue attention. Wittgenstein, a kindred spirit to Weil, once suggested that a truly great philosopher needs to be dead at least a century, *and if* some people are then still losing sleep over something the dead thinker wrote, he or she becomes eligible for greatness. This was true of Kierkegaard, for example. No one outside of a few of his enemies in Copenhagen knew who he was until his work got translated into English a century after he was dead. Weil is on track. She's been dead now over 90 years.

Why now, the surge in interest? Maybe this is because in these jaded times there is a certain appeal in a thinker who stood for a level of integrity rare even among the greatest thinkers.

Let me confess, I am about as cynical as they come, I don't think it's possible not to be cynical about political, religious, and ethical matters *and* have your eyes open to what is happening in the world. But Weil, even for me, remains an inspiration because she, too, kept her eyes wide open while not letting that stop her from looking for something, invisible, beyond the horizon.

I call our times the age of therapy. From the number of cures being offered, future historians (if any) will conclude we must have been living in pretty sick times. And then there are tons of two-bit cynics, who pretend to embrace the intolerable. Very few manage to die trying to live in the tension between being both *not* a nihilist and *not* a day-dreamer at one and the same time. Weil was one.

We will touch on three areas of her philosophy: political, religious, and ethical, barely sketching a few of her ideas. Hopefully, you'll be encouraged to pursue them further.

In my impressionistic intro in the meetup description, I tried to portray her as, on all three fronts, homeless. The unifying theme of her thinking is an attempt to reconcile the facts that we must live with others and can only attain our highest development as individuals through interaction with them, *while at the same time*, every time we associate with others we risk being dehumanized by the experience.

Music

Max Richter – Exiles

"Flying nuns in the broken nation," Wernor Herzog narration from Harmony Korine's *Mr. Lonely* with the theme "13 Angels Standing Guard 'Round the Side of Your Bed" by A Silver Mt. Zion.

No, I am not a believer, but I recall fondly when it was possible to be.

– Bianco Luno

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
The Philosophy Club in February 2025
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle